

Hans-Joachim Schmidt

NATO and Arms Control: Alliance Enlargement and the CFE Treaty

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Summary

The ongoing realisation of the enlargement of the Western alliance will create a new challenge for the future of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). At present Russia strictly opposes the enlargement and has rejected any compromise. Russian diplomats have demanded that the weapons of the East-Central European countries should be counted as part of the NATO group ceilings if these countries join the Western alliance. They have indicated that Russia could withdraw from the treaty if this is not done. From the Russian point of view, it seems to be a political circumvention of the CFE Treaty if East-Central European countries accede to NATO without changing their CFE group of states membership. With its new proposal on the modernisation of the CFE Treaty on 23 April 1996 in Vienna, the Russian Federation underlined its principal rejection of the enlargement and increased the political pressure on the West because it could use its opposition to enlargement as an instrument to block the modernisation of CFE.

On the other hand NATO countries argue that from the point of international law the enlargement would have no effect on the treaty. However, there is an admission that the consequences for the treaty could only be evaluated if new members were actually to join the alliance. Within NATO there is in general a broad consensus to offer Russia some kind of compensation. What is still a matter of dispute is the time, nature and extent of the appropriate Western accommodations because the moment and extent of enlargement have not yet been decided.

In spite of the fact that there is no movement in the central question, one can see a slight rapprochement between the sides on a subordinate level. During the CFE Review Conference all participants agreed to the Russian request to start immediately negotiations "aimed at improving the operation of the Treaty in a changing environment". The "scope and parameters" for these talks "should be defined as a matter of priority" and a "progress report" should be presented at the OSCE Lisbon Summit, including "recommendations on the way ahead". In its new proposal Russia has also hinted at certain possibilities for compromise. It is no longer demanding a renegotiation of the CFE Treaty, a "supplementary agreement" would suffice, and it is being suggested that there would be no need for a formal ratification of adjustment measures. These are very important steps to reduce the fears of many CFE member states that negotiations on adaptation and modernisation could be a slippery road to the relaxation of the treaty requirements. Finally, the ceilings for the newly proposed alliance sufficiency rule are being left open, which signals a preparedness to be flexible in negotiations.

Cooperative security policy for Europe and the CFE Treaty can only survive if both sides are prepared for a fair compromise. But a compromise requires a clear understanding of what is at stake and of what both sides want for their security. In this context it is not good policy for Russia simply to say no to the enlargement of NATO, because this would mean abandoning any chance of influencing the price the West must pay for it. Secondly, Russia needs to make a clear decision on the question of what it seeks to obtain from NATO. Also, NATO must answer specific questions: will NATO enlargement stop after the accession of the Visegrad states, or will it be an open process? The answer will have a profound impact on possible solutions. The paradox of the present situation is that neither side has yet made its position clear enough for the other side to be able to decide on its own negotiating strategy.

Besides this situation there are numerous possibilities for a compromise. Within the framework of its own approach, the West could offer the Russian Federation a binding unilateral reduction of the Western entitlements and of those of the East-Central European candidates for NATO membership. As one of the main beneficiaries of NATO enlargement, Germany could offer additional unilateral reductions or NATO could offer an additional declaration not to exceed certain limits in Central Europe. The NATO states' actual holdings are already 25% below their entitlements, and the East European armed forces will follow this trend in the long term as they modernise and transform themselves into professional armies, so there is enough room for manoeuvre. These unilateral and binding declarations should ensure that the Western group of states does not exceed its present ceilings even after the accession of new members. As additional confidence-building measures, the West can offer for example notification of and invitation to observe joint military manoeuvres in the new East-Central European NATO states at a battalion or brigade level and at the equivalent level for air forces and naval exercises, and also the possibility that Russian and other non-NATO armed forces could participate in such manoeuvres.

This step could in turn make it possible to do away with the group of states concept altogether, for instance by means of a joint declaration. This would also be a positive step because since the end of the East-West conflict the group of states concept is the main obstacle preventing other European states acceding to the CFE Treaty. However, three fundamental questions could arise here. Firstly, what would the consequences be for major provisions of the treaty such as national entitlements, the D.P.S.S. rule, and the passive inspection quota? Secondly there is the question of what procedure should be followed in the event of a further NATO enlargement. The Russian Federation and the next candidates for NATO membership will, for different reasons, have a particular interest in clarifying this issue in order to make future NATO enlargements more predictable. Thirdly, once the group of states approach has been abandoned the zonal concept is also redundant. Both Ukraine and Russia are interested in getting rid of this concept, since they feel themselves to be discriminated against by the separate limitations placed on what used to be the Kiev Military District (in the case of Ukraine) and on the flanks; these two states are the only treaty signatories forced to accept limitations within their own territories. The difficulty here is that problems would immediately arise with Turkey, Azerbaijan and Norway, who see the flank rule as an indispensable element of the CFE treaty. Without additional regional measures, therefore, the treaty regime cannot simply abandon the group of states approach and the zonal concept.

With the introduction of a new sufficiency rule for military alliances, future NATO enlargements could be made more predictable. The problem with this idea is that the new rule is likely to amount to an additional obstacle to future NATO enlargements and so to be resisted by East European candidates for membership. The question is, is it possible to include enough flexibility in this new rule and to satisfy the security needs of all participants. In addition to this idea, a new restrictive troop-stationing rule would be conceivable, as a way of reducing Russian fears on this score.

It remains to be seen whether the NATO countries can achieve the necessary unity and whether they have sufficient room for manoeuvre in terms of domestic politics. The reform of NATO and a redistribution of alliance tasks and burdens is a key precondition for this. The West European states, especially France, are in the context of increasing EU autonomy less interested in additional restrictions and reductions than in finding additional room for manoeuvre. The Russian Federation and the USA, on the other hand, both have an interest in containing and controlling Western Europe. Radical disarmament measures would therefore heighten the West European dilemma of having to choose between greater dependence on the USA and greater autonomy. Russia wants neither to drive the West Europeans back into the arms of the USA, nor to encourage West European autonomy if this can be avoided; given the overall goals of cooperation and control, this could make less drastic West European reductions the more attractive option. The Russian Federation's dilemma could be that it needs to be able to point to substantial Western cuts in order to disarm domestic criticism of a foreign policy seen by some to be too weak.